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ORAL READING AS AN AID IN THE INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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My theme contemplates the discussion of but a part, though an essential part, of the function of the teacher of literature in secondary schools. There are at least three objects of paramount importance which the teacher of literature should constantly bear in mind, in his endeavor to obtain the best results from imparting to his pupils the full sense and significance of any given piece of literature, in prose or verse. The first requisite to the adequate understanding of any written composition is, in a large degree, mechanical. The learner must be taught something of its history, its authorship, its general purpose, and its relative importance in letters. Allied to this knowledge, and much more difficult, is that study which may be considered the staple and vital part of literary training, namely, the complete intellectual mastery of the book or selection under examination. This implies an exact knowledge of its form, metrical or prose; of its diction, its profundities of thought, and its refinements of artistic expression; and, above all, of its spirit, its motive, and the distinctive individual trait which constitutes its style and originality. Lastly must be considered that profound cultural quality of every great work of literary art, especially every great poem, which cannot be taught by ordinary methods of instruction, however clear and forcible, but which depends upon the living voice for its interpretation, especially with young and immature minds. I quite agree, on this last point, with Professor Hiram Corson, who, in his lively little protest against merely mechanical teaching, first published in 1894, *The Aims of Literary Culture*, says:

Literary knowledge and literary culture are two quite distinct things—so distinct that a student may possess a large fund of the one, and be almost destitute of the other. He may be able to answer any question asked him on English literary biography, or history, or the cheap philosophy of English literature

presented in his textbook, or on ten thousand other things merely *incident* to the literature, without ever having truly assimilated any single poem or impassioned prose composition; for assimilation, in such case, is largely a spiritual process.

Every teacher who loves literature for its own sake, and who derives from it the thrill awakened by what is called true appreciation, must agree with Mr. Corson, where he says:

The indefinite spiritual element which every true poet must have, and which constitutes its real life, as a poem, we can only know when our own spirits respond to it, and then we may be said to know it more vitally than we know the definite intellectual element of it; for it is a matter of inward consciousness, and there is nothing more vital and positive than that.

Again, we will all assent, I think, to the general statement that the best response to the essential life of a poem is secured "by the fullest interpretive vocal rendering of it;" and that "the vocal rendering must exhibit not only the definite intellectual articulation or framework of a poem, through emphasis, grouping, etc., but must, through intonation, varied quality of voice, and other means, exhibit that which is indefinite to the intellect."

It will be observed that Mr. Corson is mainly interested in the art of teaching excellent poetry, to which end he deems vocal rendering absolutely necessary; but there is a more obvious and purely intellectual necessity which the teacher in ordinary schools will find for the use of vocal speech, in making intelligible the printed sentence. Not only must

"voice and verse

Wed their divine sounds, and mixed glory employ
Dead things with inbreathed sensible to pierce."

but plain prose often needs the vocal organs to interpret the idea hidden in the inky symbol.

It is a commonplace that the first object of the teacher is to make the learner understand. The word exists for the sake of the idea; but the word does not always convey the idea, even to the somewhat trained mind of the high-school student; and sometimes the misunderstanding of a sentence arises from a failure to get the right meaning of a particular word. For instance, many a pupil, on first reading *L'Allegro*, has fallen into the natural error of associating the idea of sentimental talk, and not of mere sheep-counting, with the lines:

"Every shepherd tells his tale
Under the hawthorn in the dale."

A writer in *The Dial* confesses that the only line in Gray's "Elegy" which, in school, made an impression on him, was the line, "The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear," and that he was deeply interested and puzzled regarding the natural history of that same "ocean bear." Even our great American poet and critic, Lowell, when asked the meaning of Browning's poem, "Sordello," placed his hand over his heart and answered: "I don't know."

The most felicitous oral reading might not much assist where there is a deficiency of knowledge of the particular passage read.

But, in many cases, the mere utterance, the right pause, the true phrasing, the quality of voice, make clear the meaning of a sentence that the eye alone might not rightly interpret. A few examples may be cited:

"Then shall man's pride and dulness comprehend
His actions', passions', being's use and end."—POPE.

"And who but wishes to invert the laws
Of order, sins against th' eternal cause."—POPE.

"If Fortune be a woman, she's a good wench for this gear."—*Merchant of Venice*.

"If the devil be within and that temptation without, I know he choose it."
—*Merchant of Venice*.

"Bassanio, Lord Love, if thy will it be!"—*Merchant of Venice*.

"for the poor wren,
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl."—*Macbeth*.

Iago. I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

Oth. O yes, and went between us very oft.

Iago. Indeed?

Oth. Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that? Is he not honest?

Iago. Honest, my Lord?

Oth. Honest. Ay, honest.

Iago. My Lord, for aught I know.

—*Othello*.

Numerous instances might be gathered from standard literature, of sentences which are relieved of their apparent obscurity by the proper vocal rendering. But it is not in the correction of such errors that the fine art of the elocutionist is put to the severest test. The

really good reader, who thoroughly comprehends the inmost significance of the language he aims to interpret for another, may not only reproduce the conception of an author, but may invest it with a consummate charm that would delight the author as with a sense of something beyond words as mere signs of ideas. He adds "the gleam," as it were, "the light that never was on sea or land." He may startle the minds of his pupils to an unwonted degree of receptivity by the mere suggestiveness of modulation and tone and cadence. He seems to give perfect utterance to the elusive and unattainable reality which even the greatest poet strives vainly to express, because the merely visible instrument, though it conventionally represents his thoughts and feeling, is inadequate. What infinite pathos and beauty a Jefferson imparts to the relatively commonplace speeches in *Rip Van Winkle*! Doubtless Shakespeare **would** have caught from Booth's inimitable rendering of *Hamlet* some far-reaching significations which even the "rapture of creation" had not revealed to himself.

Few orators, few masters of dramatic representation, few teachers even of the profoundest discernment and the greatest vocal skill, can, by their art, pluck the deep soul out of the mystery of an immortal poet's song. Much less may the ordinary instructor, though an accomplished scholar, hope to perform the miracle of perfect oral interpretation. The most that can be expected of the average conscientious teacher is that by a sincere and luminous reading he may awaken in the hearer a true emotion of conscious delight and a strong desire to penetrate more deeply into the hidden melody which breathes the elusive meaning which the writer labors to make audible to the soul. After the poem or other impassioned work of literary art has been intellectually studied, analyzed, synthesized, grasped as a whole and in its complex details, then may it be read aloud with all the power and enthusiasm that may make its dry bones live, transforming mere anatomy into physiologic and psychic actuality. The class will respond to such reading, and go forth from the recitation elated and inspired with a new reverence for the studies which hitherto they may have regarded as mere task-work, or at best only as material for intellectual discipline or as the means of passing an examination.

But should the pupil himself be required to read aloud for the purpose of elucidating the thought and feeling of the author studied? Yes, such practice should be attempted even in the lower classes, and persevered in, under intelligent guidance, until he finds himself enabled by this practice to verify, by the just management of the instruments of speech, such conceptions as, by silent study or by listening to others, he has acquired. He will learn to do by doing; he will translate type into tongue; his oral reading will react upon his faculty of perception; he will discover that without a clear understanding of the text no intelligible elocution will be possible.

However, the teacher must not expect too much of the beginner, nor depend upon a presumed natural talent, nor exact high art from the tyro. He should be patient with the callow youth and with the crude monotony of the growing maiden. Joubert, that wisest of French teachers, has written that "children have more need of models than of critics;" and this is especially true as regards the acquisition of the elements of any art.